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Promoting student engagement with a large class (400+): Implications for large sized lectures, small group workshops and online teaching and learning

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Abstract

Student engagement is widely accepted as a contributing factor on learning and success in higher education (Kahu, 2013). While a range of structural, psychosocial and psychological variables reportedly impact on student engagement, the effects of class size and particularly large classes is frequently cited as a determining influence (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010; Cuseo, 2007). This paper will present a discussion on various practices as a means of promoting student engagement with 400+ student teachers in a variety of teaching and learning environments such as small group workshops, large sized lectures and online sessions, while simultaneously highlighting that the pedagogy of the faculty is most influential and innovative course design is required to promote student engagement in large classes.

Keywords: *Student engagement; small group teaching; large sized class; blended learning environment; digital technology; pedagogy*

1. Teaching and Learning Context

Dublin City University (DCU) Institute of Education offers a number of concurrent (undergraduate) and consecutive (postgraduate) initial teacher education (ITE) programmes but with an annual minimum intake of 400 students, the concurrent four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) primary teaching degree is one of the largest cohort in the University, but also one of the larger ITE provision funded by the State in Ireland (Sahlberg, 2019). To illustrate the pedagogical and methodological approaches adopted in promoting student teachers' engagement, this paper will focus on a 5 ECTS module located in year 3 of the B.Ed. programme. The module explores integrated teaching and learning practices across the Irish Primary School continuum and comprises of two courses that focus on the various class levels of primary school; early years and the middle/senior years. For illustrative purposes, the discussion that follows, will concentrate on the early years course which all third year student teachers are registered to undertake one session each week over 11 weeks. The course is structured on student-faculty contact in small group workshops and large sized lectures; as well as asynchronous online sessions to achieve the module learning outcomes which is continuously assessed over the duration of the course. In this particular context, approximately 35 students constitutes small group teaching in a workshop space, while the large class comprising of 400+ students in a lecture theatre.

Given the reciprocal nature of teaching, the course prioritises face to face contact between students and faculty to promote learning and cognition as social processes; and the small group workshop space in particular enables the students to interact with content presentation, teaching resources, peers and faculty at an immediate and personal level. Such an environment promotes active student involvement and participation, dialogic and collaborative learning, as well as frequent opportunities for affirmation and feedback (MacGregor, Cooper, Smith and Robinson, 2000). By the student teachers experiencing this pedagogy, it is envisaged that they will be able to justify and implement such practice in their own future teaching. However, the prevalence of small group teaching with a large class in higher education institutions is subjected to impeding structural factors such as faculty workload, availability of appropriate teaching spaces and student scheduling (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Cuseo, 2007). As a consequence, the challenge arises to balance active learning and the teaching of content presentation within the context of large sized lectures, while maintaining student engagement.

The engaging pedagogy of active and collaborative learning that is promoted through interaction in group activities and dyadic work with peers during the workshops is continued in the lecture space, where the 400+ students are given opportunities to engage in peer-peer discussion and reflection during the lecture. As is the practice they are accustomed to in workshops, students are required to complete a variety of tasks based on content presentation

during the lecture and submit at the end of the lecture to demonstrate their learning and subsequently verify their participation and attendance.

The use of the University's online learning platform i.e. Loop, powered by the open source product, Moodle, facilitates the submission of assessment tasks and enables faculty to provide individualised formative and summative feedback. Additionally, when faculty-student contact in workshops and lectures is unfeasible for the institutional reasons referred to above, students participate in asynchronous online sessions. As part of these online sessions, students engage with course material and complete a series of independent online tasks which contribute to course assessment.

In the educational context outlined here, it is the attributes of small group pedagogy integrated into large sized lectures and the use of digital technology which support student engagement in the teaching, learning and assessment process.

2. Literature Review

Student engagement is widely accepted as a contributing factor on learning and success in higher education. As a multifaceted construct, student engagement embodies the affective relationships among peers and educators within the socio-cultural learning environment; and student behaviour such as the psychological investment, interest and effort assumed when navigating the learning experiences (Kahu, 2013). This multidimensional understanding is consistent with Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan & Towler (2005) who ascertained that four factors of skills, participation/interaction, emotional and performance impacted on student course engagement and indicate the role faculty play in orchestrating the learning environment.

Equally, engaging students in their learning and the learning process is a defining feature of effective teaching (Francis, 2012). This is of particular relevance to pre-service teachers, who need to develop the knowledge and the skills of teaching and learn how to apply in their future practice. Therefore it is essential that student teachers participate and reflect on their learning process and experience the associated pedagogies that promote student engagement. Hereby, illustrating the intricacies of teacher education programmes which are underpinned by learning about teaching and, teaching about teaching (Loughran, 2005).

With this in mind, "students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers...they must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 4). This assertion is akin to Vygotsky's (1978) vision of pedagogy and the pedagogical 'good' of small group teaching is based on the understanding of learning as an interactive, social process, within which the educator facilitates the cultivation of new knowledge where the

student is actively involved. Small group pedagogic spaces offer dialogic and responsive teaching, learning and formative assessment opportunities. The reciprocal and interactive dynamics within the group fosters active participation and an authentic sense of student engagement.

With higher education institution demands and structural constraints, the sustainability of small group teaching is unpredictable (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). Large class size may appear to be a solution, but should not be to the detriment to the quality of the teaching and learning process for the student. Large class settings seem to induce 'lecturing' as a more convenient method of instruction which mitigates student engagement (MacGregor et al., 2000). Cuseo (2007) indicates with large classes, students tend to experience a more faculty dominated delivery of content presentation with little or no opportunities for interaction and class participation in comparison to small group teaching experiences. It is reported that the student's passivity has a negative influence on engagement, course satisfaction, attitude towards the course and subject matter, class attendance, retention and ultimately, academic achievement and performance (Cuseo, 2007). Hereby inferring that the pedagogy of the faculty is most influential and innovative course design is required to promote student engagement in large classes (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Francis, 2012; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010).

3. Implications for Practice

In response to Cuseo (2007), who seeks to speculate the optimal class size in higher education, it is more apt to shift the discussion to student-oriented pedagogy as a means of engaging students in their learning. In considering the varying levels of engagement, a wider institutional approach is a prerequisite so as to provide the necessary resources and supports to both students and faculty; though Bryson & Hand (2007) suggest faculty need to deliberate on the discourse with their students, their enthusiasm for the subject and their professionalism with the teaching process to afford quality higher education experiences, irrespective of class size.

As indicated in the earlier discussion on the course structure, opportunities for active participation and collaborative learning is facilitated through interaction in group and dyadic work with peers and faculty during the course lectures and workshops. Also relative to faculty pedagogy, Cuseo (2007) tributes the frequency of assessment and regularity of feedback in the promotion of student engagement. In this particular course, the achievement of the learning outcomes is evaluated by continuous assessment of the various tasks the students participate in and complete in lectures, workshops and online sessions. Students participate in assessment tasks such as independent writing tasks (Bean, 2001), co-operative learning activities (Cavanagh, 2011), group and peer discussion and reflection, independent Loop quizzes and advance organizers (Asubel, 1960). Crediting student's participation (Smith,

1992) provides a mechanism to motivate students to attend class in order to complete a series of tasks. In workshops, the completion of a task is assessed and immediate feedback is provided by faculty. However, with the large number of students in the lecture theatre space and the faculty to student ratio, this has proved problematic in providing immediate feedback. Instead students are required to submit at the end of the lecture and to Loop for individualised formative and summative feedback.

The use of digital technology in this teaching, learning and assessment process, not only increases access to faculty feedback but also enables the monitoring of attendance with the large size lecture in a reliable manner. Equally the asynchronous online sessions when faculty-student contact in workshops and lectures is not institutional feasible, creates a blended learning environment, whereby blended learning is understood as “the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences. The basic principle is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.5). However, for blended learning to be successful in promoting student engagement, it is vital that faculty carve opportunities in courses for students to discuss and reflect upon the online material and make links to course learning enabled by other modes.

The challenge of teaching effectively within a mass education system has significance for student engagement and the teaching and learning process. However, the pedagogies and practices outlined in this paper are an indication of the possibilities which can be implemented with large classes when faculty are responsive to the student and the socio-cultural nature of education in higher education institutions.

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